File #: Res 0679-2024, **Version:** *

Res. No. 679

Resolution designating August 2 annually as James Baldwin Day in the City of New York to honor his legacy as a groundbreaking essayist, novelist, playwright, poet, and civil rights activist, who fought racial and sexual discrimination with candor, sensitivity, and lasting influence

By Council Members Hudson, Hanif, Restler, Cabán, Williams and Louis

Whereas, James Arthur Baldwin was born in New York City (NYC) in Harlem on August 2, 1924, to a single mother, Emma Berdis Jones, and was raised as the oldest of nine children by his mother and stepfather David Baldwin, a Baptist minister; and

Whereas, As a child, Baldwin sought out books to read at the public library and began writing poems, short stories, and plays at an early age; and

Whereas, Baldwin attended Frederick Douglass Junior High School, where he was taught French and mentored by the remarkable Harlem Renaissance poet Countee Cullen; and

Whereas, Baldwin went on to DeWitt Clinton High School in the Bronx, where he served as the editor of the school literary magazine and joined the literary club; and

Whereas, From the age of 14 to 17 and having been influenced by his very strict stepfather, Baldwin preached in a small Pentecostal church and later remarked that his preaching experience “is what turned me into a writer, really, dealing with all that anguish and that despair and that beauty”; and

Whereas, After graduating from high school in 1942, he lived through the Harlem Race Riot of 1943 and the death of his stepfather, which caused him to give up on going to college in order to help his mother care for his younger brothers and sisters, while working at menial jobs and writing on his own; and

Whereas, By his early twenties, Baldwin was publishing book reviews and essays, eventually in well-

known publications, and was mentored by literary great Richard Wright, who helped Baldwin get a grant to allow him to finish his first novel and move to Paris; and

Whereas, Baldwin relocated to Paris in 1948 to escape both racial discrimination that he and other Black Americans faced in the United States (U.S.) and sexual discrimination, and he began to write what have become modern classics in American fiction and nonfiction, typically rooted in his own experiences; and

Whereas, His best-known essay collections were *Notes of a Native Son* (1955), *Nobody Knows My Name* (1961), and *The Fire Next Time* (1963), written as the Civil Rights Movement was taking shape and covering a wide range of subjects, including literature, film, personal experiences at home and abroad, sexuality, and race relations; and

Whereas, During the Civil Rights Movement, Baldwin became an ally of Medgar Evers, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King, Jr.; and

Whereas, Though Baldwin wrote about race relations, participated in historic marches in Washington and in Selma, and organized protests, including a march in Paris to support the Civil Rights Movement in the U.S., he described his role in the Movement as "bear[ing] witness to the truth," noting that "no society can smash the social contract and be exempt from the consequences"; and

Whereas, Baldwin appeared on the May 17, 1963, cover of *Time* magazine, which noted that "in the U.S. today there is not another writer-white or black-who expresses with such poignancy and abrasiveness the dark realities of the racial ferment in North and South"; and

Whereas, Baldwin's unfinished screenplay adaptation of Alex Haley's *Autobiography of Malcolm X* two decades later became the basis for Spike Lee's acclaimed *Malcolm X* film; and

Whereas, Baldwin famously said in a debate at the University of Cambridge in 1965, "It comes as a great shock to discover the country which is your birthplace and to which you owe your life and your identity has not in its whole system of reality evolved any place for you"; and

Whereas, Baldwin described his acclaimed and best-known semi-autobiographical novel *Go Tell It on*

the Mountain (1953), which dealt with his upbringing in Harlem by his difficult stepfather, as the "book [he] had to write if [he] was ever going to write anything else" and noted that he had "learned a lot" from his stepfather and that "nobody's ever frightened [him] since"; and

Whereas, His semi-autobiographical novels *Giovanni's Room* (1956) and *Another Country* (1962) explored sexuality, sexual preference, and the nature of love with frankness, dignity, and artistry; and

Whereas, Baldwin dedicated *Giovanni's Room* to Swiss painter Lucien Happersberger, who provided Baldwin with a peaceful place to write in Happersberger's family's chalet in the small village of Löeche-les-Bains in the Alps and whom Baldwin once described as "the one real love story of my life"; and

Whereas, While living back and forth between the U.S. and France for the rest of his life, with long stays in Turkey as well, Baldwin kept an apartment in NYC, but lectured and taught at the University of California at Berkeley, the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, Mount Holyoke College, the New School of Social Research, and more; and

Whereas, Considering his own reputation as a writer, whose fictional work especially had sometimes been critically reviewed by his colleagues, Baldwin said that "any real artist will never be judged in the time of his time; whatever judgment is delivered in the time of his time cannot be trusted"; and

Whereas, Baldwin died in 1987 of stomach cancer at his home in St. Paul de Vence, France, and his funeral was held at NYC's Cathedral of St. John the Divine; and

Whereas, Baldwin is now judged outside of his own time as "one of the giants," in the words of civil rights leader Reverend Jesse Jackson, who knew him, and as a "prolific and sensitive writer" whose "voice was not watered down by political considerations"; and

Whereas, The designation of a day is fitting to commemorate the life and legacy of James Baldwin, who wrote and spoke about injustice so eloquently and profoundly that his influence on both accomplished authors and young writers and his impact on everyday New Yorkers continues unabated today; now, therefore, be it

Resolved, That the Council of the City of New York designates August 2 annually as James Baldwin

Day in the City of New York to honor his legacy as a groundbreaking essayist, novelist, playwright, poet, and civil rights activist, who fought racial and sexual discrimination with candor, sensitivity, and lasting influence.

LS #17481
9/9/24
RHP